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ROMANTIC CAREER OF FAMOUS PICTURES

For a poor man to be the owner of a fortune without knowing it, especially when that fortune takes the form of a famous picture, is by no means unusual, for many of the most priceless paintings in existence have found their way into the possession of humble folk, who, in the majority of cases, have not discovered the fact until too late.

Seven years ago a man, according to an exchange, in passing a rag and bone shop in the Paris slums, saw an old panel lying among a lot of cast-off clothing in the window, and being a collector of curios, he went in and secured it for the trifling sum of three francs. He took his purchase home, and when it had been cleaned he was astounded to see the signature of Rembrandt, with the date 1629 in one corner. Experts proved that the panel was indeed the work of the great master, and shortly afterward the owner refused four thousand pounds for the curio.

Several of the Gainsborough paintings have undergone very romantic careers. The famous "Duchess of Devonshire" for a long time lay unsold in a Sloane Street furniture-shop, until Mr. Wynne Ellis bought it for sixty pounds, and sold it by auction shortly afterward for nineteen thousand one hundred guineas. Another picture by the same artist once hung in Dolby Hall, and the owners at length, thinking it useless, gave it to some children to use as a target for their marbles. The picture had been penetrated in several places, when the children's father was only too glad to accept an offer of seven pounds from a dealer for it. Rothschild has refused ten thousand pounds for it.

At least two of Rubens's masterpieces have been almost given away by their owners, who were ignorant of their worth. Some years ago a London bricklayer, out of work, pawned a blackened picture for a few shillings, and the pledge never being redeemed, it was sold by the broker to a dealer for a sovereign. On cleaning the picture, the dealer found it to be a genuine Rubens, and ere the week passed he sold it to the late Lord Dudley for seven thousand pounds. The same painter's "Lot and His Daughters" was for more than fifty years in the possession of a poor family at Bath, who willingly sold it for a few pounds in an auction-room in 1895, only to hear shortly afterwards that experts had since valued it at ten thousand pounds.

Few men have been so fortunate as was an impecunious friend of the late J. E. Millet, for the great artist, anxious to repay a slight service rendered some years before, decided to paint a picture and sell it to his benefactor for a small sum, in order that he might sell it again at a profit. The result was his masterpiece, "L'Angelus," and he let his friend have it for forty pounds. A few hours afterwards that lucky individual resold it for fifteen thousand pounds.